



OFFICE OF THE
NATIONAL COMMANDER

July 23, 2003

To All Members of the United States House of Representatives:

As you and your colleagues consider the VA-HUD Appropriations Bill for FY 2004, I urge Congress to fund VA medical care at the level proposed in the FY 2004 budget resolution it adopted earlier this year.

As The American Legion's National Commander, I have visited over 60 VA medical facilities across the country only to find that budgetary shortfalls are preventing hundreds of thousands of American veterans from receiving timely access to quality health care. This is a national embarrassment, especially as hundreds of thousands of young men and women are currently placed directly in harm's way.

Today, I visited Walter Reed Army Medical Treatment Facility. I would encourage each of you to make a visit before voting on this VA-HUD Appropriations Bill. Once these young men and women are discharged from active-duty, they will return to their hometowns in your congressional districts where they are eligible to enroll in the local VA medical facility, only to face major surprises:

- ✓ They may have to wait 6 months or longer for their initial enrollment appointment.
- ✓ They may have to wait another 6 months or longer for their initial medical appointment or referral to a specialist.
- ✓ Initially, VA will assign them to Priority Group 6 until they receive their service-connected disability rating, which may take months or even years.

This situation is even worse for those returning Reservists and National Guard personnel after months of active-duty service. Unless these members of the Reserve component actually served overseas in the theater of operation, many of these new "veterans" will be denied enrollment, if VA determines they are Priority Group 8 veterans. Due to inadequate funding, VA Secretary Principi must continue his prohibition on the enrollment of any new Priority Group 8 veterans.

On July 15, I testified before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and presented Congress with my report on the VA health care system entitled, **A System Worth Saving**. This summarized my personal visits to local VA medical facilities, where I learned first-hand of the difficulties America's veterans are experiencing in accessing VA health care. Copies of this

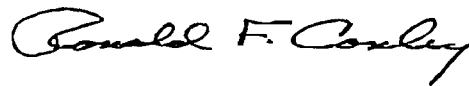
report have been distributed to your offices. The men and women in the armed forces today took the same oath of enlistment as generations of American veterans. Their dedication to this country is as steadfast as those who served in the Continental Army in 1776. They carry on the personal commitment to duty, honor, and country that has kept this nation free – the world's beacon of democracy.

What is the cost of freedom? That cost can only be calculated by the way America treats its sons and daughters that were willing to die to protect and defend it.

The budget resolution, agreed to by both chambers, called for just over \$30 billion in VA medical care. That was before Operation Iraqi Freedom. To fund VA medical care short of that recommendation sends a chilling message to those who served in the liberation of Iraq, especially those brave men and women whose lives have been forever altered as a result of combat. The Purple Heart these heroes received will not care for their wounds, replace lost limbs, or remove the mental scars the horrors of war produce. For many of these service-connected disabled veterans, VA's integrated medical health care system is now their primary life support system. Their dependence on the specialized care for prosthetics, spinal cord injury, or blind rehabilitation will determine their quality of life.

In the People's Chamber, you are the voice of your constituents. This is not about partisan politics – this is about America's sons and daughters. I have looked into their eyes. I have heard their fears. Ladies and gentlemen – this is about the thanks of a grateful nation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ronald F. Conley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ronald" being the most prominent.

RONALD F. CONLEY
National Commander